

What killed Lolita? Necropsy findings released for the Seaquarium's beloved orca

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The Seaquarium's beloved performing killer whale, Lolita, appears to have died of old age and multiple chronic illnesses, according to the executive summary of her necropsy released Tuesday afternoon to the Miami Herald.

Lolita, also known as Tokitae or Toki, died Aug. 18 at the age of 57. Her carcass was swiftly packed in ice and driven to the University of Georgia, where a necropsy was completed on Aug. 19.

In initial reports, the Seaquarium cited [kidney failure](#) as the cause of death. That finding appears to be backed up by the documents released by the Seaquarium on Tuesday.

"The results of the analysis performed indicate that the death was due to the progression of multiple chronic conditions some of which derived from age," the Seaquarium wrote in a [press release](#).

Dr. Judy St Leger, a veterinarian with 20 years of experience working with marine mammals, conducted the necropsy. She found Lolita suffered from "acute and chronic bronchointerstitial pneumonia and renal degeneration, and a chronic condition of the heart implying the degeneration of the cardiac valves."

Just a few days prior to her death, Lolita was declared to be in excellent health by the veterinarian overseeing her care and by the CEO of The Dolphin Company.

"A week ago, the vets were here. You know, she was doing great. And the staff is completely devastated. Because this just came completely out of the blue," said Pritam Singh, a Keys developer and founder of Friends for Lolita. "But we had no idea that this was going to happen and so we're as surprised as anybody else."

After the necropsy, Lolita's cremated remains were spread across her home waters in a traditional ceremony conducted by Lummi Nation leaders. Known by her indigenous name of Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut, the orca was considered a member of the Lummi tribe.

Lolita was being trained for a possible cross-country move to her native waters in the Pacific Northwest. The plan, developed by the nonprofit Friends of Lolita in conjunction with the Whale Sanctuary Project, was to transport the aging orca to a sea pen in Puget Sound, where she was captured from the L pod in 1970. NFL owner Jim Irsay pledged to help fund the \$15–20 million relocation, but acknowledged that many obstacles had to be overcome, such as obtaining various state and federal permits.

A group of Lolita's former trainers and vets, called Truth4Toki, opposed what they called "a risky fundraising publicity stunt" that Lolita would not survive given her age, medical issues and half century in captivity. They advocated a short move to Orlando's SeaWorld, where she could live in a larger tank and be cared for by orca experts.

Some of the orca's health problems arose after her diet was reduced from 160 pounds of fish per day to 120 pounds two years ago, ex-trainers and vets said. They feared she was chronically dehydrated, putting stress on her kidneys. Seaquarium said her [food intake](#) was cut to be in tune with the reduced amount of exercise she was getting.

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